

GE FEI

Remembering Mr. Wu You

Translated by Howard Goldblatt

1.

Not until the two middle-aged policemen in white uniforms and their young skirt-clad female partner showed up did the villagers reluctantly recall Mr. Wu You. That bygone episode, like a maiden's lost chastity, stirred the people's emotions. And since their recollections were triggered by the introduction into their lives of the three outsiders, village elders were quick to tell youngsters eager to revisit the painful past, "Time erases all memories."

Thanks to the three uniformed guests, the villagers learned of such things as handcuffs and, so they were told, alarm sirens. A sense of security accrued from the presence of the outsiders, even though they were not above putting on airs at times. One of their favourite pastimes was getting farmers to stop work, either out in the woods or in the shade of the high walls, to relate obscure details regarding Mr. Wu You. They failed to get the answers they sought, not because the people were so uninformed but because they were so blasé. Nothing excited the people of the village. I, on the other hand was eager to work with the outsiders. I still recalled how the condemned man was shot that morning.

Mother reacted to the news that I was going to watch them shoot Mr. Wu You at a spot five miles from where we lived by slapping me across the face. "Killing a man is the same as killing a chicken," she said. So I went back out to watch my younger brother do just that. Old K, who was still little then, held the chicken by its neck in one tiny hand and a small penknife in the other. As I walked up to him, he asked me to help. "Killing a chicken is the same as killing a man," I said.

"They're the same thing," Old K replied.

Suddenly, the bird broke loose and flapped its way across a block of stone before soaring over the wall. Old K stood there holding his blood-streaked penknife, mesmerized by the sight of chicken feathers floating above us. I grabbed his hand and dragged him out the gate, telling him we were going to watch them actually kill a man. He was standing beside me when they shot Mr. Wu You. His mouth hung slack, and he was a different boy from the one who was trying to kill the chicken. On the way home, he muttered the only thing he would say for three whole days: "Killing a man is a lot easier than killing a chicken."

I divulged this to the three outsiders, who wouldn't dignify it with a response, would not even jot it down. But when I told them I was a distant relative of Mr. Wu You's, they smiled and turned real friendly, urging me to go on with my story. My ears rang with official jargon in a singsong twang that made my skin crawl. I said Mr. Wu You was shot on the day of the dragon-boat festival.

"That's perfect!" the skirt-clad young woman said.

It really was the day of the dragon-boat festival. Women, some of whom had stayed up all night, went down to the stream to pick leaves, which they floated home on bamboo rafts, in sampans, even in washbasins as wrappings for their glutinous holiday treats. A gossamer mist hung in the early morning air like evanescent steam, heavy with the subtle fragrance of water reeds. Men were washing rice in large sieves. Children played behind their parents as they worked, splashing stream water with stripped willow switches. Just then one of the younger wives took off running from one end of the village to the other, shouting the whole way. And that is how people learned that Mr. Wu You was going to be shot later that day. Everyone watched her run, except for a smattering of young fellows who had no idea what was going on, since they were too busy staring at the fleshy mounds jiggling beneath her pink chemise to worry about what she was shouting. Much later, whenever they discussed the affairs of that morning, they admitted it was the first time they had ever seen a woman run like that, and for them all other living objects hung in a state of suspended animation.

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As soon as they heard the clanking noise, the villagers knew that the police were out for a stroll: all manner of brass contraptions in all sizes hung from their uniform belts. Encountering a middle-aged woman out on the street, they decided to question her. One of them casually slipped a brass hoop off his belt and fitted it over the woman's head, telling her it was a high-frequency lie-detector ring, the most advanced of its kind in the world. It shrieks every time you tell a lie. So she clammed up while the hoop was in place. But as soon as it was removed, words gushed from her mouth. Their technology had met its match.

Apparently feeling tension in the air for the first time since their arrival, the outsiders asked me to show them Mr. Wu You's living quarters, in an old, dilapidated, and boxy little ancestral hall. His room had been sealed on the day of his death, and no one had entered it since. Prying open the rusty latch was hard work. When we finally got the door open, we were greeted by a thick cloud of dust. It was stifling inside, and we were sweat-soaked in no time. The room was just as its occupant had left it, as if awaiting his return. A coat of fine white dust had accumulated on a pencil sketch tacked to the wall: a black sun sinking into the reedy bank of a black river inhabited by a pair of egrets with crossed beaks. The sketch had been done for him by an itinerant artist. Appearance was important to Mr. Wu You, who could not abide dirt or slovenliness. He shaved with a finely honed straight razor and wore a black oilcloth apron when doing the dishes. Years later, whenever his name came up in conversation, the villagers invariably remarked, "Just like a woman!"

While finding nothing germane to their reinvestigation of the Mr. Wu You case, the police did note that his bookcases were empty. Mr. Wu You had been a lover of books. On the day the village headman ordered the people to move Mr. Wu You's books outside and burn them, it took more than five hours for the flames to consume the whole pile. Villagers watched the curling ashes of all that paper get sucked up a chimney as their faces were turned blood-red by the blaze. Only Apricot wept. A frequent guest at Mr. Wu You's ancestral hall, where she enjoyed his books, she was the only person he ever taught to read, and it did not take her long to learn a hundred and one ways to cure measles.

Unanimity has not been reached on what actually led to the fiery episode: some say the headman was drunk at the time, but they are refuted by others who say he drank very little that day.

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The villagers found Mr. Wu You's behaviour that day shocking, to say the least. Armed with his seven-inch straight razor, he confronted the village headman in the area's largest public square, and people who saw how jumpy he was knew he had been waiting there for some time. The headman stripped to the waist and hung his shirt in the crotch of a nearby tree, exposing a muscular chest tanned the colour of bark. Brandishing his razor, Mr. Wu You charged like a crazed jackass, but the headman stepped nimbly out of the way, clenched his fists, and launched a ferocious counterattack. The first blow landed squarely on Mr. Wu You's nose, spraying blood all over the place, as if a rotten tomato had splattered on his face. The second one caught him on the back of the head, and he teetered briefly before thudding to the ground—just as I opened our attic window, which gave me a ringside view of the mayhem. Surrounded by spectators filling the square, Mr. Wu You staggered to his feet, drying clots of blood clinging to his face, and took a few wobbly steps, like a circus clown trying for a few laughs. Then with a slightly churning motion, he hit the ground again.

The three outsiders danced a jig when this incident was related to them by an old man who guarded the woods. The skirt-clad young woman shocked him by planting a kiss on his whiskered cheek. It was he who had lugged Mr. Wu You home afterward, only to incur the wrath of his wife—that day and every day thereafter—for bloodstains on his shirt that wouldn't wash out no matter what she did. Even now, traces of those badges of glory remain on the back of his yellowed undershirt. After the old watchman laid Mr. Wu You on his bed, Apricot opened the door and strode in, obviously having got wind of the fight. As she approached Mr. Wu You's bed, he spat a mouthful of bloody phlegm in her direction; but she merely removed her apron, leaned over and gingerly wiped the blood from the corners of Mr. Wu You's mouth. The watchman gets all choked up even now when he recalls that incident. "I've never seen a more fetching girl," he says. "Like a pixie."

Mr. Wu You was just another villager, no one special, even taking into consideration the fact that he had once owned a roomful of books. Then some village children came down with what everyone called the sweats, for which the only known treatment was pillowing their heads on oven-dried river gunk. Mr. Wu You tried to convince them that a certain wild herb could cure their children, but no one listened. Nothing could win over the zealous disciples of the pillow treatment until he employed an argument they could understand: bulls seldom get sick because they graze on wild grasses. The villagers decided to give Mr. Wu You's treatment a chance. It worked, and overnight his ancestral hall became the local clinic.

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The burning of Mr. Wu You's books shook the people's confidence in his healing arts. But he had committed an astonishing quantity of the incinerated books to memory; it was an extraordinary gift that not only saved the clinic but simultaneously invested him with

mystical airs. By then, Mr. Wu You and Apricot had become nearly inseparable, a development that sparked mixed reactions in the villagers. To some, the relationship seemed shady at best, she hardly ever left the boxy ancestral hall until late at night, in the company of Mr. Wu You. Over time, they wore a path through the woods between his home and hers, luminous and white. Gradually, the villagers warmed to Apricot. For by then, they nearly worshipped Mr. Wu You, and rather than concern themselves with the rectitude of the relationship, they convinced themselves that an atmosphere of harmony and sanctity prevailed. Naturally, the village headman was never far from their thoughts, since he had secured his position as headman not by grasping the essentials of forest-fire prevention or by practicing the art of divination but by virtue of a robust, muscular body and a broad, menacing forehead. He was a mighty lion, or so the village women said. Later, after the headman had been carried off by dysentery, a village old-timer told me, "The women were moved to tears even when they knew the headman was feeding them a line."

One day, an outsider came to the village. He swept a spot of ground clean of snow and set up a performing-monkey show. Mr. Wu You and Apricot, who were in the audience that day, looked over at the smirking headman, who said deliberately and in full voice, "I'm going to kill you two." People close by were laughing so hard at the performer's antics they didn't hear the headman. But my brother Old K heard him, and he streaked home as fast as his legs could carry him. Long after the incident, he told me he ran like the wind that day, flung open the door, and fell flat on his face. Yet even before he could clamber to his feet, he was shouting, "The headman's going to kill Apricot and Mr. Wu You..."

Like so many village women, Mother was off in some lovely dreamland as she stitched soles for cloth shoes, so she may not have heard what Old K was saying. Which is why she merely grunted in response.

Many days passed. Green buds popped from willow branches growing wild above crumbling walls at the village entrance; if you looked past the reeds on the riverbank, way off into the distance, you could see the new grass in the mountain hollows. Suddenly, the village buzzed with talk that Mr. Wu You had killed Apricot. No one doubted the truth of the story, since he had confessed to the crime. A couple of forensic interns were invited to the village for what would be their first autopsy. They began by laying Apricot's body out on a three-legged ping-pong table, then stood on either side of her, butcher knives at the ready. She looked just as she had when she was swimming in the river in midsummer, the way people had so often seen her: ruddy faced and full of life. Not knowing exactly what to do, the two interns commenced cutting and kept at it all day, until it was impossible to tell what was what. Winding up with seven separate pieces of unequal size, they concluded that Apricot had been strangled after being raped.

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The three visiting police officers really knew their business: the skirt-clad young woman filled every page of her thirty-by-forty centimeter notebook. One day, she and the others spoke to the person who actually shot Mr. Wu You, a lad named Kangkang. On the eve of the dragon-boat festival, after the magistrate informed him he would be Mr. Wu You's executioner, he decided to make some repairs on his double-barreled shotgun, a family heirloom that hung on the wall of his mother's room. A one-time paralytic whom Mr. Wu You had cured, she had just got out of bed when her son came in to take down the

shotgun, which had gathered dust for thirty years or more. "Going after wild boar?" she asked. He walked out without a backward glance.

Kangkang painstakingly wiped down the shotgun three times before taking it to the blacksmith to straighten out the barrel, which was thirty degrees off center. Then he loaded it, went down to the river, took aim at a billy goat, and fired, creating a dark hole the size of a man's thigh in the animal's belly. He smiled contentedly.

The next morning after old K and I sneaked out to watch Mr. Wu You's execution, we encountered a woman with bound feet, moving as fast as those tiny feet would allow, sort of like bouncing along on stilts. A month or so after Mr. Wu You's execution, we learned the facts of the murder from her lips: her husband had suffered a terrible headache that night, so she took some spirit money into the woods to burn at the family grave site. There she saw the headman force Apricot, who had been walking home alone, to the ground. She was no more than twenty paces from them at the time. The night was absolutely still, she said, and the subtle fragrance of reeds along the riverbank drifted over on gentle winds. It was an intoxicating setting, with a milky miasma that hung over the woods and a lovely halo girding the moon. She declared that the sight of the headman ripping off Apricot's clothes and white underpants had moved her to tears.

For more than a month following Apricot's death, she was in the grips of dementia, her eyes vacant and clouded, until she knew she must do something to keep from going stark raving mad. So on the morning the young wife ran shouting from one end of the village to the other, the bound-foot woman, knowing she could keep the truth bottled up inside her no longer, decided to reveal what had happened that night. She ran like a woman possessed to the execution ground.

The onlookers grew impatient as a light rain fell. Kangkang took aim at Mr. Wu You on a signal from the magistrate, who had a red three-cornered flag in his raised hand. He dropped his arm, and Kangkang pulled the trigger. *Blam!* The shotgun misfired, blackening the front of Kangkang's white shirt. He spat angrily and reloaded. There was fear in Mr. Wu You's eyes. He strained to open his mouth, but his tongue had been cut out a month earlier. He was gesturing frantically when Kangkang's double-barreled shotgun roared one last time.

By the time the woman with bound feet hobbled up to the execution ground, mud-spattered from head to toe, Mr. Wu You was already in the ground. A few bloodstains and some bristly hairs were all that remained. A fine rain was still falling as way off in the distance a wedding party of men decked out in reds and greens was on its way to fetch a bride, their horns blaring, their drums banging. They disappeared from view on the opposite bank of the river.